

Brooklyn on the Spree



The dance floor recently at Chesters, a formerly defunct Berlin club that has been reanimated by two American expatriates, Dan DeNorch and Michael Ladner.

Credit...Mustafah Abdulaziz for The New York Times

By Zeke Turner, 21 February 2014

BERLIN — “The music reminds me of Brooklyn!” said Winston Chmielinski, a 25-year-old painter who moved here from New York last year. Like one of the cranes hanging over the city but never managing to create a skyline, he was dancing with outstretched arms, lowering and raising himself at the Panorama Bar, the upstairs dance floor at Berghain, a popular club.

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Vincent Bouffandeau, a regular at the Panorama Bar, was hovering later near the back of the dance floor and couldn’t find the beat. “Is this T-Pain?” he asked, perplexed, in a thick French accent. A Cooper Union alumnus gyrating nearby nodded yes. “I feel like I’m in an American club I don’t belong to,” said Mr. Bouffandeau, a 33-year-old from Nantes, France, who designs websites for car auctions at eBay’s offices here.

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He headed to the coat check to grab his black leather motorcycle jacket, and when the evening's biggest act, the Los Angeles-based duo Nguzunguzu, took over the sound system, Mr. Bouffandeau was already on another dance floor nearby at a birthday party for Eric Cloutier, a D.J. who defected to Berlin from Bushwick, Brooklyn, last winter.

According to government statistics, the number of Americans living in the German capital has more than doubled in the last 10 years. And a subdivision of their ranks is an increasingly powerful cadre of New Yorkers around the club community and electronic music scene. They are not just living the bohemian dream, reveling in the city's libertine dance floors and cheap rents, but taking over sleepy venues, creating their own parties and leaving a significant imprint on the city's musical program.

"I don't have to worry about my bills nearly as much," said Mr. Cloutier, 32, explaining his move. "I can go play a couple of gigs and I'm set for the month, and I have the other 28 days to work on music, as opposed to the other way around in New York."

Dan DeNorch, 27, moved to Berlin from New York two years ago and has since taken a job booking D.J.s and reviving a defunct club in Kreuzberg called Chesters. He's also started his own dance party, Janus, with another American. Although New York has "tons of people ready to party and there's lots of parties," Mr. DeNorch said, the conditions are unfavorable because of legal hurdles and a lack of space, which he experienced as a regular at D.J. Venus X's popular GHE20 GoTH1K (pronounced "Ghetto Gothic") party, an important reference for the designers Hood by Air.

"I came to Berlin and the canvas is insane," Mr. DeNorch said. "There's so much that's possible here, because of the spaces, because of the music culture that's grown up around here. I mean, in New York it's so hard to find a small club or a medium-sized club with a subwoofer, because of noise complaints." (Still, he has not completely abandoned his origins, returning to host Janus at MoMA PS 1 in Long Island City starting at teatime Sunday.)



Cultural transplants, from left, J'Kerian Morgan, a.k.a. the D.J. Lotic; Dan DeNorch; Michael Ladner; and James Whipple.

Credit...Mustafah Abdulaziz for The New York Times

Chesters has six subwoofers, a lot for a small club with a single dance floor. Hidden under an elevated booth and stripper pole in the front corner there is a concrete horn enclosure, which Mr. DeNorch described as a system for generating “insane amounts of bass pressure.” It hasn’t been turned on since the club’s days as the after-hours techno club Turbine about a decade ago. Airtight doors also remain from the time, along with a loft at the back of the dance floor used for group sex during the space’s earlier life in the 1990s as the KitKatClub, a heterosexual swingers’ gathering place.

For their monthly Janus party, Mr. DeNorch and Michael Ladner, 28, have been booking D.J.s from the United States and remote corners of Europe to fill the schism between the music that dominates Berlin’s clubs (house and techno) and the pastiche of global styles that is played at parties like GHE20 GoTH1K.

“We also wanted to be a corrective to this weird blindness that we were seeing, in terms of people being inspired by — I just have to say — black music, but not really interacting with it,” Mr. DeNorch said.

For their first party, they booked D.J. Slink, an American pioneer of the Jersey club genre, at the MädchenInternat, a former girls’ schoolhouse in the gentrified East Berlin neighborhood of Prenzlauer Berg. Venus X came from New York to play soon after. Ashland Mines, a D.J. who hosts a popular gay party in Los Angeles, Mustache Mondays, has played Janus four times. Mr. DeNorch and Mr. Ladner have also hosted D.J. Marfox, a Portuguese D.J. and flag-bearer of kuduro, a style of dance music from Angola.

D.J. HVAD, whose style Mr. DeNorch described as “almost shamanesque juke,” came from Denmark to play at Janus. “He had a gong, and people were really into it,” Mr. DeNorch said.

“Well, half the people said they loved it, and half the people said they hated it. People were just down. I think people are just down here way more often than any other place I’ve been.”

On one weekend night at Chesters in October, Mr. Chmielinski came over between dance moves while a Canadian D.J. was playing and said, “I feel like this party is all New York people.” But in the next instant, a lean German father wearing a T-shirt and mustache came over to ask if there was

MDMA at hand, explaining that his children were in the countryside for the weekend.

Honey, we weren’t in Kansas anymore.

Mr. Ladner and Mr. DeNorch’s parties at Chesters have become a home of sorts to a crowd of 20-somethings who moved to Berlin from New York and beyond, and began gathering around a bar called Times started by two artists, Calla Henkel, 25, and Max Pitegoff, 26, in 2011. After finishing Cooper Union in 2010, the two moved here from New York and, with \$5,000, opened the bar in a vacant Neukölln storefront.

Their parties began spilling over into the basement, where a ceiling under six feet tall didn’t stop people from dancing. “It was never trying to be something it wasn’t, and everyone knew what they were getting into when they came and D.J.’d,” Ms. Henkel said. “There was a lot of energy. Some of the best nights of my life in terms of music were there, but obviously they needed a much better space.” She and Mr. Pitegoff let the lease on Times’s space run out, but last summer they opened a new bar close by called New Theater, which replaces Times’s makeshift dance floor with a homemade stage.

At turns a theater of war and cabaret ground zero, Berlin is still recovering from the 20th century. After the war, German companies opened headquarters around Stuttgart, Munich, Frankfurt and Hamburg, but avoided the capital city because of the Wall. Not one firm among the 30 largest German companies traded on the Frankfurt Stock Exchange has its main headquarters in Berlin. Before German reunification, young West Germans living in Berlin were exempt from compulsory military service, so the city became a gathering point for low-ambition cool kids before expats started moving here.

The Americans Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff at the New Theater, the bar they opened after closing their first space, Times.

Credit...Mustafah Abdulaziz for The New York Times

But young New Yorkers in particular are poised to handle this market. “In New York specifically, there’s a huge amount of stress about what you’re doing tonight and where you’re going to be in the city and who you’re going to be with,” said Mr. Ladner, a founder of the Janus party. “You have to lock in these decisions.” Mr. Lardner grew up in Larchmont, N.Y., with parents who were lawyers and who commuted into Manhattan. During high school he spent weekends in the city with his father. He attended Oberlin, arrived in Berlin in 2007 for his last semester and never moved back.

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“There just isn’t really this fear of missing out,” Mr. DeNorch said. “You just feel like wherever you’re at is fine. You’re just having a good time.”

“When you want to go out to the club, you grab a beer on the way,” he said. “You can buy some weed on the street so you can smoke a joint if you want to. There’s all these little things you can do here that you can’t do there to get you in the mood.”

“You can go to a club here and party with a great sound,” he added. “You can party for seven hours. You’re not going to get hassled, the drinks aren’t going to cost you a ton of money, people aren’t going to be rude to you. People are going to dance, they’re going to have fun. You can buy drugs here — easily.”

What’s hard in New York is easy in Berlin, but it used to be the other way around. Boris Dolinski, 52, a native Berliner and the cardinal resident at Berghain, traveled to New York for three weeks in 1985. On New Year’s Eve, he took ecstasy for the first time in the Paradise Garage and flew back to Berlin four years later.

“If you went to the Paradise Garage or the Loft, you went to a place where all these people were getting into music,” said Mr. Dolinski, sitting in the apartment in an old Stalinist building near Berghain in Friedrichshain that he shares with an Australian roommate. “Like 2,000 people dancing, having fun, getting into amazing music and an amazing sound system. And of course it was mostly Afro-Americans, which for me was something totally new. I just gulped it all up because I really loved it. And of course since I got there in the beginning of 1986, I also experienced the beginning of house music.”

As the clubs he loved in New York started to close (the Paradise Garage on King Street in the West Village now houses Verizon trucks), the Wall fell in Berlin, so he packed his bags and came home. “It was a very strong emotional change, going from one city that I felt burnt down to ashes and going to another city that was rising like a phoenix.” Mr. Dolinski returned to New York last March to D.J. at the Roseland Ballroom for the Black Party, one of the biggest gay parties in America, and again over the summer to play at the techno club in Williamsburg Output. “On the street, you can see that the people are always very stressed out, and I think that also makes them leave New York,” he said.

Certainly Mr. Ladner and Mr. DeNorch appear less stressed. In the afternoon, hours before heading to the Panorama Bar to hear Lotic, one of their resident D.J.s at Janus, the two partners were sitting next to each other in a cafe in Prenzlauer Berg, enjoying a slightly retro-feeling meal of pasta salad and cappuccino.

“Obviously there’s this idea that Americans have very imperialistic attitudes,” Mr. DeNorch said.

“Not going to argue with that, but what we’re doing — —”

His partner butted in before he could finish.

“This is our home,” Mr. Ladner said. “This is our home.”

A correction was made on March 2, 2014:

A picture caption last Sunday with an article about Americans who run nightclubs in Berlin misstated the business relationship between Dan DeNorch and Michael Ladner, two Americans, and the Berlin club Chesters. They book D.J.’s for the club and host parties there; they do not own it.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. Learn more

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